

## What Doesn't Kill Me Makes Me Stronger? Examining the Redemptive Self

FYS 100

Dr. Eranda Jayawickreme

Wednesday/Friday, 9.30-10.45

Room: Greene 312

Office hours: Wednesday/Friday 11-12 and by appointment

Spring

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### General Overview:

Nietzsche's claim that "what does not kill me makes me stronger" has great intuitive appeal, and many of us believe that experiencing hardship and troubles can leave us in a better place than we were before. Psychological scientists have become increasingly interested in studying the positive life changes that people report in the aftermath of highly stressful life events including (but by no means limited to) diagnosis with terminal illness, bereavement, and sexual assault. This notion has been referred to with many different names, but the construct is most commonly referred to by scientists as *adversarial growth*, *posttraumatic growth*, *stress-related growth*, *altruism born of suffering* and *benefit finding*. These positive changes relate to the development of important qualities of character, such as diligence, generosity, love, purpose, and humility. Thus, adversity may provide opportunities for the development of important character traits, echoing St. Paul's insight that "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Romans 5: 3-4). While the theme of "strength from adversity" is a central theme in many works of philosophy, theology, and literature, the empirical evidence remains mixed. In this class, we will discuss the question of redemption, whether adversity is in fact needed for the full development of character, and engage with Project Re-Entry, a program that offers educational and support services to former offenders before and after their release from prison, in discussing the possibilities for redemption in the context of structural inequality and issues related to mass incarceration.

### Key Questions:

1. What is resilience? What is posttraumatic growth? How are they different?
2. What does the research say about the benefits of adversity?
3. Why is doing good science on "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" so challenging?
4. What are the cultural narratives surrounding the belief that adversity can make you stronger?
5. Can individuals who have endured extensive adversity change and grow?

The class will be conducted in a seminar format with a community outreach component involving a partnership with Project Re-Entry, a program that offers educational and support services to former offenders before and after their release from prison. (<http://www.ptrc.org/index.aspx?page=296>)

### Course Objectives:

- Students will demonstrate increased competency in writing (both scientific and reflective) over the course of the semester.
- Students will articulate some of the key concepts and findings in psychological research on resilience and posttraumatic growth.
- Students will be able to identify and explain the role (and benefits/limits) of cultural narratives in propagating beliefs about posttraumatic growth in U.S. society.
- Students will articulate the main controversies about doing scientific research on posttraumatic growth and by extension the value of good science and the context in which it is understood.
- Students will reflect on how they respond to adversity in their own lives.
- Students will apply their course knowledge to the experience of how rehabilitated offenders can respond positively to adversity in their lives following release.

**Skill Development:**

- Completing a reflective “diary” weekly throughout the semester where they reflect on their well-being across the week, challenging events that they experienced, whether they perceived a “silver lining” in those events.
- Conducting interviews with individuals who have potentially experienced positive changes following adversity (e.g. individuals who have been through the Project Reentry rehabilitation program), and compare the interviewees’ reports with the research evidence.
- Engaging with primary research evidence as part of their course reading
- Writing papers analyzing stories of redemption in their own personal experience.
- Providing feedback to peers’ assignments.

**Course Assignments and Grade Distribution:**

- Participation 20% (Includes blog posts & peer review)
- Thematic Essays 40%
- Scholarly Essay 10%
- First Reflection Essay 5%
- Podcast Assignment 20% (includes topic description & podcast planning draft)
- Final Reflection Essay 5%

Letter grades will be determined as follows:

<u>Letter Grade</u>	<u>Points</u>
A	92.5-100
A-	89.5-92.49

B+	86.5-89.49
B	82.5-86.49
B-	79.5-82.49
C+	76.5-79.49
C	72.5-76.49
C-	69.5-72.49
D+	66.5-69.49
D	62.5-66.49
D-	59.5-62.49
F	<59.49

**NOTE:** Your contributions to class discussion will be noted when final grades are calculated; students who are very close to the cut-off score for the next highest letter will be bumped up to that letter grade. For example, if a student's final score for the course is 89.45 (an "B+"), it will be rounded up to an A- if the student participated a great deal in class discussions.

**Essays:** First, students will write a short paper synthesizing the major scholarly approaches to the study of redemption in psychology, philosophy and religion (3 pages). Second, students will write a series of four essays that apply one of these scholarly approaches to a range of examples: including victims of mass incarceration, civil war, genocide and unemployment (750 words each). Third, students will write a paper (750 words) analyzing stories of redemption in their own personal experience. Fourth, students will provide feedback to two of their peers' posts (250 words each). Finally, students will have the opportunity to revise their blog posts and write a reflective essay about their experience with Project Re-Entry (1250 words).

All essays are due to me at the beginning of class on the scheduled date. The purpose of a late policy is to communicate to students that meeting a deadline is important. You must complete and turn in work by the beginning of class on the date the essay is due. I will not accept essays emailed to me. If you are going to be absent when an essay is due, be sure to give it to a classmate or friend, so I have it at the beginning of class.

**No late essays will be accepted. No exceptions.**

**Interview and Podcast:** Students will conduct interviews with individuals who have potentially experienced positive changes following adversity (e.g. individuals who have been through the Project Reentry rehabilitation program), and compare the interviewees' reports with the research evidence. Working in groups, students will create a 2-4-minute podcast with either film or audio/still photographs using materials from this interview and the class.

**Weekly Diary:** Students will complete a weekly "diary" throughout the semester where they reflect on their well-being across the week, challenging events that they experienced, whether they perceived a "silver lining" in those events. Students will write a final paper analyzing stories of redemption in their own personal experience.

**Weekly Blog:** Students will contribute weekly blog posts on material relevant to the course material

**Participation:** This course is discussion-based so engaged participation is required in every class. Note that you will not get an A in participation just for coming to class. Passively receiving course information, even with perfect attendance, will only get you a C in this category. I am happy to meet with you to develop strategies for engaging more actively with course readings and discussions. Make-up work for participation will be accepted for absences under certain conditions. Participation includes group presentations, active listening, asking questions about reading material, offering ideas and comments in discussion, completing reading assignments, representing the university and following protocol on off-campus research trips, offering constructive peer critiques, and collaborating with peers on group assignments.

**Class courtesy:** It is important to have a classroom in which individuals respect the professor and the other students. Arrive on time, and stay for the entire class. Turn off cell phones (don't just put it on vibrate) and **do not** text message during class. Also, laptop computers are not to be used during class time. If you bring them into class, they should remain closed.

**You may think you can multi-task in class. I thought the same thing when I was in college (and sometimes think that even now). You cannot. Data supports this.**

**Attendance policies:** Class attendance is mandatory. You must be in class to receive points for assignments or activities. Most of the lectures include information that may not be provided in your text. If absent, (excused or unexcused) it is the student's responsibility to get notes and assignments from classmates and/or meet with me to answer any questions. **Please do not email me and ask if you missed anything- if you miss a class, of course you missed material and announcements.**

Note that you are allowed THREE unexcused absences. Each further absence will result in a reduction of your final letter grade by a 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g., after three unexcused absences, a final letter grade of a B+ will be reduced to a B). If excessive absences occur, (more than 4 absences) the Office of Academic Advising at WFU will be notified. It's a good idea to make an appointment to see me before such measures are needed.

**E-mail and Sakai:** Students are responsible for information posted on Sakai and sent to their email accounts.

## Readings

The following books are required and are available for purchase at the bookstore:

Rendon, J. (2015). *Upside: The New Science of Post-Traumatic Growth*. Simon and Schuster.

McAdams, D. P. (2010). *George W. Bush and the redemptive dream: A psychological portrait*. Oxford University Press.

Dagan, D. & Teles, S. M. (2016). *Prison Break: Why Conservatives Turned Against Mass Incarceration*. Oxford University Press.

The following articles will be available on Sakai (some of these will be optional):

Jayawickreme, E. & Blackie, L.E.R. (2014). Posttraumatic Growth as Positive Personality Change: Evidence, Controversies and Future Directions. *European Journal of Personality*, 28, 312-331.

Shadd Maruna, *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*. American Psychological Association, 2001 (selected chapters)

Hobfoll, S. E., Hall, B. J., Canetti-Nisim, D., Galea, S., Johnson, R. J., & Palmieri, P. A. (2007). Refining our understanding of traumatic growth in the face of terrorism: Moving from meaning cognitions to doing what is meaningful. *Applied Psychology*, 56(3), 345-366.

Jayawickreme, E. & Blackie, L.E.R. (2014). Posttraumatic Growth as Positive Personality Change: Evidence, Controversies and Future Directions. Target article at *European Journal of Personality*.

Linley, P. A., & Joseph, S. (2004). Positive changes following trauma and adversity: A review. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 17, 11-21.

McAdams, D. P. (1994). Can personality change? Levels of stability and growth in personality across the life span. In T. F. Heatherton, & J. L Weinberger, (Eds.), *Can personality change?* (pp. 299-313). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

McAdams, D. P. (2013). The psychological self as actor, agent, and author. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 8(3), 272-295.

McAdams, D. P., & De St Aubin, E. (1992). A theory of generativity and its assessment through self-report, behavioral acts, and narrative themes in autobiography. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 62(6), 1003-1015.

Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (1996). The posttraumatic growth inventory: Measuring the positive legacy of trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 9, 455-471.

Ford, J. D., Tennen, H., & Albert, D. (2008). A contrarian view of growth following adversity. In S. Joseph & P. A., Linley (Eds). *Trauma, recovery, and growth: Positive psychological perspectives on posttraumatic stress*, Hoboken, New Jersey. John Wiley & Sons Inc. pp. 297-324.

### Tentative Course Schedule

Week	Wednesday (in class)	Homework	Friday (in class)	Homework
<b>1</b> <b>(1/11 &amp; 1/13)</b>	Welcome, Goals of class	Blog (Reflective question)	Defining PTG; Resilience Rendon, Introduction/	Diary

			Chapter 1	
<b>2</b> <b>(1/18 &amp; 1/20)</b>	Science of PTG; Resilience; Discussion Rendon, Chapter 2	Blog	NO CLASS Rendon, Chapter 3 Tedeschi & Calhoun Calhoun & Tedeschi	Complete Essay #1 on theories of PTG/Resilience; Diary
<b>3</b> <b>(1/25 &amp; 1/27)</b>	Methods used in PTG research Essay #1 due; Discussion  Presentations Jayawickreme & Blackie; Commentaries  Rendon, Chapter 4	Blog	What are the challenges of doing good research?; Presentations  Jayawickreme & Blackie Commentaries  Rendon, Chapter 5	Diary
<b>4</b> <b>(2/01 &amp; 2/03)</b>	What are the challenges of doing good research?  Presentations Blackie & Jayawickreme Rendon, Chapter 6 Tennen, & Affleck  <b>Podcast check-in 1</b>	Blog, Complete Essay #2	What are the cultural narratives surrounding the belief that adversity can make you stronger? (Introduction)  Rendon, Chapter 7  Essay #2 (unemployment) due	Diary
<b>5</b> <b>(2/08 &amp; 2/10)</b>	Narratives of growth (introduction)  Rendon, Chapter 8 & 9	Blog	Narratives of growth in Rwanda	Diary, Complete Essay #3
<b>LAST DAY TO DROP FULL-TERM CLASSES 02/14</b>				
<b>6</b> <b>(2/15 &amp; 2/17)</b>	Narratives of growth in Rwanda; discussion + documentary	Blog	Narratives of growth in America  McAdams, Introduction/ Chapter 1	Diary

	Essay #3 (civil war) due			
<b>7 (2/22 &amp; 2/24)</b>	Narratives of growth in America; Guest speaker  McAdams, Chapter 2	Blog	Narratives of growth in American politics;  McAdams, Chapter 3	Diary, Complete Essay #4
<b>8 (3/01 &amp; 3/03)</b>	Narratives of growth in American politics, presentations  McAdams, Chapters 4 and 5  <b>Podcast check-in 2</b>	Blog	Narratives of growth and mass incarceration; visit to Project Re-Entry Essay #4 (genocide) due  Dagan & Teles, Preface/ Chapter 1	Diary
<b>SPRING BREAK (3/04- 3/12) MID-TERM GRADES DUE 3/08</b>				
<b>9 (3/15 &amp; 3/17)</b>	Narratives of growth and mass incarceration; presentations  Dagan & Teles, Chapter 2 & 3	Blog	Discussion of chapters from Making Good with Project Reentry staff  Dagan & Teles, Chapter 4	Diary
<b>10 (3/22 &amp; 3/24)</b>	Interview preparation workshops  Dagan & Teles, Chapter 5 & 6	Blog, Complete Essay #5	Interview preparation workshops Essay #5 (mass incarceration) due  Dagan & Teles, Chapter 7	Diary
<b>11 (3/29 &amp; 3/31)</b>	Can individuals who have endured extensive adversity change and grow?-- Discussion	Blog, Interviews with Project Reentry	Can individuals who have endured extensive adversity change and grow?-- Discussion  Dagan & Teles,	Interviews with Project Reentry; Diary

	Dagan & Teles, Chapter 8 & 9		Chapter 10	
<b>12</b> <b>(4/05 &amp; 4/07)</b>	Can individuals who have endured extensive adversity change and grow?-- Discussion of interviews  Maruna, selected chapters	Blog, Peer Evaluation #1	The Redemptive Life-- Can you develop it in your life?  Rendon, Chapter 10	Diary
<b>13</b> <b>(4/12 &amp; 4/14)</b>	The Redemptive Life-- Can you develop it in your life?  Rendon, Chapter 11	Blog	The Redemptive Life-- Can you develop it in other people's lives?  Rendon, Chapter 12	Diary, Peer Evaluation #2
<b>14</b> <b>(4/19 &amp; 4/21)</b>	The Redemptive Life-- Can you develop it in other people's lives? Discussion of challenges  Rendon, Chapter 13	Blog	The Redemptive Life-- Take home from your lives	Diary
<b>15</b> <b>(4/26)</b>	The Redemptive Life-- Take home from interviews  Final Reflective Essay Due	Blog		
<b>Finals Week</b>	Podcast & Final Essay Due			